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ABSTRACT

To study student motivation and performance on a research project in a college-level humanities class, students were given a choice of three assignments. They could choose a traditional research paper on art, a creative narrative modeled after the popular novel "Girl with a Pearl Earring," (Tracy Chevalier), or a WebQuest on the Holocaust. Most students chose either the creative narrative or the WebQuest. Their papers were of a higher quality than those of the students who chose the traditional research paper, based on preset criteria. A survey of student responses to the assignments indicated that the students who chose the alternative assignments had a higher sense of satisfaction with their work than those who chose the traditional paper. Appended is information for undertaking each of the three projects. (Author/BT)

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Motivating Learning in a Humanities Class Through Innovative Research Assignments: A Case Study

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Abstract

In order to study student motivation and performance on a research project in a college-level humanities class, students were given a choice of three assignments. They could choose a traditional research paper on art, a creative narrative modeled after the popular novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, or a WebQuest on the Holocaust. Most of the students chose either the creative narrative or the WebQuest. Their papers were of a higher quality than the traditional research paper, based on pre-set criteria. Also, a survey of student responses to the assignments indicated that the students who chose the alternative assignments had a higher sense of satisfaction with their work than those who chose the traditional paper.

Motivating Learning in a Humanities Class through Innovative Research Assignments: A Case Study

Each semester as I prepare to teach The Modern World, an interdisciplinary and team-taught humanities course which is part of a four-course general education requirement at our university, I find myself searching for a new approach to the required research component. One of the goals of the humanities sequence is that students will engage in research, critical thinking, and analytical writing. However, the traditional research paper assignment doesn't seem to accomplish these goals for most undergraduate students even though they have most of the required skills by the time they are second and third year university students. They can identify sources, especially on the web, and summarize their findings. However, their critical thinking is often limited because they fail to analyze the resources they have surveyed and develop their own point of view. Their papers often end up reading like semi-encyclopedic entries or a pastiche of sources. Students and teachers both are frustrated.

Research on Motivation

The research on student motivation gives insight about what might be happening when students respond to the research assignment. Motivational theorists identify two kinds of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. Students are extrinsically motivated when they accomplish a task in order to receive a reward outside of the task. For example, students who do an assignment because they want to complete a requirement or get a passing grade are extrinsically motivated. Students are intrinsically motivated when they do an assignment because it is personally interesting, fulfilling, or enjoyable. The assumption behind the idea of intrinsic

motivation is that students naturally seek to develop their abilities and knowledge, and it gives them personal satisfaction and pleasure when they do so (White, 1959, quoted in Stipek, 2002, p. 11). Also, researchers have shown that an emphasis on extrinsic rewards can diminish a student's intrinsic motivation (Spaulding, 1992).

Teachers encourage intrinsic motivation in the classroom if they enable students to attain a sense of achievement and personal control in their work. Students need to "perceive themselves as being both competent and self-determining" for them to feel personally fulfilled in the classroom (Spaulding, 10). Both of these student perceptions are important, but a student must have a degree of competence before they benefit from an opportunity to control their learning. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), "to be self-determining, one must have the skills to manage one's environment (p. 30).

Because student competence is basic to intrinsic motivation, it is important for teachers to challenge students and to provide them with the academic support needed for them to be successful. If this can be done in a way that gives students choice and personal control of their learning, then teachers will encourage the growth of intrinsic motivation in their students.

Wanting to increase student motivation in the research project and to provide an approach that might lead students to think and write more critically, I designed two alternative research assignments, a creative narrative and a WebQuest, for students to choose along with the traditional research paper assignment. Following the completion of the student projects, I surveyed students about their choices, to understand their reactions to the process and their assessment of their own critical thinking. I wanted to see how having choices affected their sense of competence as well as continuing to learn how to improve the research process for students.

Creative Narrative Project

The creative narrative assignment requires analysis on two levels. First, students analyze the theme of a novel and, secondly, think about the way in which the author uses research to create an imaginative story about a work of art. This analysis is the foundation students draw on to write their own stories. I designed my assignment on the novel, Girl with a Pearl Earring by Tracy Chevalier (1999). After analyzing the novel, students could choose any painting from the modern period and write a story based on the painting, either how the painting came to be created or about the characters or events in the painting. Students use Chevalier's story as a model for how to craft their own stories which can be based on historical fact or be wholly fictional. Students' stories are evaluated according to three main criteria: a clear sequence of events, clearly defined characters, and originality of the point of view taken about the painting. Additional research about the life of the artist or the particular painting is encouraged, although it isn't required (See Appendix A).

WebQuest Project

A WebQuest, a web-based research project, promotes analytical thinking and research skills. Students are given a context for research and a task to accomplish, in this case, to prepare a written documentary history about one specific aspect of the Holocaust. They are required to develop a central idea and include pictures or graphics with their essays. In addition they present their findings in small groups or to the whole class. PowerPoint presentations are optional for sharing the information (See Appendix B).

WebQuest, according to the model developed by Bernie Dodge, spells out the steps in the process of conducting the research. The teacher first conducts a search on the web and identifies

sites that have accurate information or well-researched opinion. In their web search, students are required to use five of the sites and identify three additional sites. They write journal entries, describing their findings and personal reactions as they study each site. These journal entries serve as a scaffold to developing their thesis and paper.

Research Essay

The traditional research paper assignment was also offered as one of the choices. Students could formulate their own topic by choosing three paintings by one modern artist, analyzing the paintings, and researching the artist and aesthetic spirit of the period. They were required to use at least five scholarly sources (one web resource), and to use critical thinking skills to develop a central idea (See Appendix C). The instructor assumed that students were able to identify scholarly sources, analyze, and develop a thesis.

Students' Grades and Responses to the Assignments

Students were enrolled in a required general education course, The Modern World, which is a 300-level course at our university. The students ranged from sophomores to seniors with a variety of majors. None of the sophomores had chosen a major. All eighteen students completed the survey. Only two students chose to write a traditional research paper. The rest of the class was fairly evenly divided in their choices. Seven students chose the WebQuest; nine students chose to write a creative narrative.

<u>Project Grades Using Criteria Specific to Each Assignment</u>

A comparison of student grades on the various research assignments in Table 1 shows that the scores on the WebQuest and creative narrative were higher than for the traditional research paper assignment.

Table 1
Student Grades for the Research Project

Group	Number	Range	Mean
WebQuest	7	78-93[a]	86
Creative Narrative	9	82-95	89
Research Paper	2	66, 82	74

[a]Based on a possible score of 100.

Survey of Students' Responses

We used the survey in Table 2 to assess student responses to their projects.

Table 2
Humanities 324 Project Survey

Name _____
Please be candid and open in your responses. You will be given 5 bonus points on your final for complete answers to this survey.

1. My final project was _____.
   Why did you choose this project?
2. I learned about my topic: circle one
   0 1 2 3
   Not much A little Some information A lot of information
   Describe an important idea that you learned while doing this project.
3. My project gave me an opportunity for critical thinking: circle one
   0 1 2 3
   Not at all A little Somewhat A lot of critical thinking
4. If you had a chance now to choose your final project, would you choose the same project? Circle the appropriate answer: Yes Or No
   Explain why:
5. The most beneficial aspect of this project was
   Explain why:
6. The least beneficial aspect of this project was
   Explain why.

Questions # 2 and # 3 of the survey elicited student perceptions of the amount of information they learned and the amount of critical thinking they performed. As indicated in Table 3, students believed that they learned a lot and engaged in critical thinking while engaged in the WebQuest and creative narrative. The two students who wrote the research paper rated learning and critical thinking at a much lower level.

Table 3
Students' Perceptions of Learning and Critical Thinking

Type of Project		Learning[a]	Critical Thinking[b]
WebQuest	(n = 7)	2.7	2.5
Creative Narrative	(n = 9)	2.5	2.5
Research Paper	(n = 2)	1.8	1.3

[a]Averages of response to: I learned about my topic--Not much (0), a little (1), some information (2), a lot of information (3).
[b]Averages of response to: My project gave me an opportunity for critical thinking--not at all (0), a little (1), somewhat (2), a lot of critical thinking (3).

Questions # 4, 5, and 6 on the survey provided students an opportunity to explain why they responded to the project as they did. Generally, students were more enthusiastic about the innovative projects. Those who chose the WebQuest were positive about using the internet as well as learning more about the topic of the Holocaust. Those who chose the creative narrative valued the opportunity to use their imagination and write creatively. The students who wrote the traditional research paper felt that they needed to change their approach to research.

Reactions of Students to the WebQuest

When asked why they chose this particular project, five students said they were interested in the topic of the Holocaust; one student wanted to use the internet because he considered it a valuable tool. Only one student chose the project because he did not want to do the other project. So most of the students (6 out of 7) had an interest in the topic, the Holocaust, and also liked the idea of being able to do their research on the internet. Several also said that they thought they would be more successful doing this project, either because they enjoyed using the internet or because the process of research and writing were clearly laid out for them to follow.

When asked if they would choose the same project again, six answered yes and one gave a qualified yes/no. Three students said that they benefited from doing the project because they learned a lot about the Holocaust. One student said that she learned a powerful lesson about the inhumanity of man to man; another said that the images available on the web put real faces on the masses of people who were killed. Two students liked using the internet and two students thought they were able to do a good job on this project. The one student who was ambivalent about her choice felt she learned a great deal about a topic of importance but at the same time would have enjoyed using her imagination and creativity in the story project.

When asked what was the most beneficial aspect of the project, four students specifically mentioned the images that are available on the web. They made the following comments: pictures add a lot of intensity to the information, better to see than just read about an event, seeing pictures led to a deeper understanding of the event. Although most of the students were positive about all aspects of the projects, one thought the paper took too much time and another felt that the journal writing was repetitive. However, these comments also suggest that students were so engaged in examining and studying the web sites that they wanted to spend all their time with the

web resources. Overall students were positive about their learning and the opportunities afforded by the internet for research.

Reactions of Students to the Creative Narrative Assignment

Students chose this project because it was appealing and challenging. They enjoyed the opportunity to read a good book, and they wanted to challenge themselves to be creative or to try writing as a creative outlet. Also several students thought that this project would be more fun and easier to do. All the students said they would choose this project again because it was enjoyable and challenging. Again and again students said that they enjoyed reading a good novel and being able to take the time to challenge themselves to be creative.

Students listed the following beneficial aspects of the project: having to think, being creative, using imagination, and learning about a work of art. One student enjoyed the project because she had a chance to "stretch" her imagination, instead of just rewriting research. Several of the students noted that this project caused them to make connections, between real life and literature and between art and real life. They commented on how the project caused them to think more deeply.

The comments about the least beneficial aspect of the project, such as wanting to write a longer story or wanting to learn more about the artist, can be seen as positive. Students were so engaged with this project that they wanted to spend more time on it. They wanted to write longer stories and have more options. They were definitely engaged in this project.

Reactions of Students to Traditional Research

The two students who chose the traditional research paper said they made their choice for two reasons: they believed that this assignment offered the most freedom compared to the other

projects, and they also wanted to learn more about a specific artist. However, neither student rated their learning at a high level, and one indicated he would not choose this assignment again. Both students said they needed to change their approach to the research in order to develop a clearer focus for the essay.

As for the beneficial aspects of the research, both students said they learned a lot about their topic. They felt they learned something, just not enough to be successful in the project. When asked about the least beneficial aspects, one said that he did not understand how to write a research paper; both indicated that they were not strong in doing research. One said that he would have preferred being able to use the web more for his research, while this project required using scholarly books and journal resources. These students clearly needed the scaffolding provided in the other assignments.

Summary of Student Reactions

Overall students who chose the alternatives to the traditional paper were happier with their choices and talked more positively about their learning in the project compared to those who chose the traditional paper assignment. WebQuest students remarked consistently on the benefits of doing research on the web and being able to see images which gave life to the information they were studying. Students writing the creative narrative were challenged by their project and benefited from thinking critically about the novel and a work of art and turning their ideas into a creative story.

How the Projects Affected Critical Thinking

The criteria for each project required a demonstration of critical thinking. Most of the students who wrote the creative story developed a theme illustrated by the sequence of events in

the plot. Half of the WebQuest projects presented a clear thesis which was demonstrated in the documentary report. Neither of the research projects demonstrated a clear thesis.

The traditional research paper assignment required identification of sources and development of a thesis but left the process open. The WebQuest delineated the process of research and the appropriate resources. The creative narrative also provided structure by requiring students to read the novel, Girl with a Pearl Earring, before choosing a painting. Because students read the novel first, they saw at first hand how the author used critical thinking about a painting in order to create a story, so they had a process to follow when they developed their own stories.

Motivating Student Learning

The results of this case study in one humanities class support the research related to student motivation. This research states that two primary factors related to intrinsic motivation are students' perceptions of competence and their perceptions of personal control or choice in their learning. If students have little understanding or ability in an area, they cannot be expected to control their learning in that area. Rather, they are dependent on guidance to develop their understanding. The teacher can provide this guidance through lectures and specific assignments in a high-control environment with little student choice. However, the teacher can also provide guidance through projects which give students some choice in directing their learning and also sufficient structure and guidance to ensure that they will be able to successfully demonstrate competence in the assignment.

The results of this survey suggest that the traditional research project offered students a high degree of personal choice but insufficient guidance to ensure success. Students had choice

of topic, resources, and the way in which they choose to develop their essay. However, these choices are based on an assumption that students have mastered research and analysis skills. The students who chose this assignment were not as successful as the students who worked on the other assignments because they needed more guidance. They had choice but not competence, and so they believed they learned less and would not choose this assignment again. Lacking a sense of competence, these students became unmotivated to engage in a research project. Competence and choice must support each other. Students who chose the WebQuest and the creative narrative were generally successful and enthusiastic about their learning. These projects both combined student choice with sufficient structure to guide student work. This case study thus provides important insights for teachers. They can enhance students' motivation by offering choice and guidance. The results will be more interesting and pleasing to both students and instructor.

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Appendix A

The Modern World: Research and Critical Thinking Project

Creative Narrative

Read the novel, Girl with a Pearl Earring by Tracy Chevalier (1999) and write an analysis about a significant theme of the novel. Identify a specific quote from the novel which embodies the theme. Explain the quote and how it points to the theme of the story.

Then choose any painting from our period of study and write a story based on the painting--either how the painting came to be created or about the characters or events in the painting. The story you write can be based on historical fact or be wholly fictional. You should think about Chevalier's technique of creating her story as you decide how to craft your story. Stories should be at least 3 pages, typed. If you do additional research as background for your story (such as the biography of the artist or the historical period), you should attach a bibliography to your story.

Rubric which will be used to evaluate your analysis and story.

1. Analysis of Girl with a Pearl Earring which identifies a significant theme of the novel. You can use a specific quote from the novel which embodies its main theme and explain why you chose this quote and how it points to the important ideas in the story. 35 points
Clearly stated thesis:
Concrete details which develop the main idea:

2. Choose any painting from our period of study and write a story or narrative around the painting, either how the painting came to be created or about the characters or events in the painting. The story you write can be based on historical fact or be wholly fictional. 50 points

Quality of the story:
Clear sequence of events
Clearly defined characters; dialogue among characters
Originality of the story; originality of the point of view taken to the painting

3. Stories at least 3 pages, typed. 5 points

4. Appearance of the manuscript and correctness of mechanics 10 points

Appendix B

The Modern World: Research and Critical Thinking Project
Web Quest on the Holocaust

In this activity you will study the Holocaust and events of WWII by examining documents and historical information about this period as well as increase your analytical skills while writing a research report.

CENTRAL PROBLEM

You have been assigned to prepare a documentary report on the Holocaust. Rather than attempting to provide a complete overview of the Holocaust, you will choose **one particular event** or aspect of the Holocaust to describe and analyze. You will develop a central idea about this particular aspect of the Holocaust which will be the controlling idea of your report
For example, here are some of the particular aspects of the Holocaust that you could consider: Hitler=s philosophy of racism and its origins, use of propaganda to spread racist ideas (examine Nazi film, poster art, children=s books), resistance efforts

GOALS:

Critically examine historical, archival, and personal web sites for significant information
Articulate your reactions and insights to the web sites in journal responses
Develop a central, controlling idea for your report
Use the information you've gathered to support your overall, central idea in the report.

PRODUCT:

You will use the tool of the World Wide Web to evaluate ideas and information about a particular event or aspect of the Holocaust. Your "conclusion" will appear in the form of a 3-4 page report. In addition, evidence of your thinking will include open-ended journal-writing responses to 5 web sites from the Resources List and 3 additional web sites which you identify in your research.

Journal Writing Responses Criteria

Concrete details about web sites or particular parts of a site
Connections to information learned in searching other web sites
Personal reactions to the information or questions
Your responses should be your own unique analysis of what you are reading; do not cut and paste information from the web sites.

PROCESS OF THE WEB QUEST

Examine 5 of the web sites listed in Resources. Begin to write your journal response, using concrete details to describe the material you find at the site, questions that you have, and reactions to the material.

Review your notes in order to focus on a central idea for your report.

Identify new resources that are useful to the focus of your study. Journal about the information available at the site. List questions and reactions.

Prepare your report.

RESOURCES: (Links to additional sites are embedded in many of these sites.)

1. Time Line of the Holocaust and Teacher=s Guide to People and Places
   http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/timeline/timeline.htm

2. Holocaust Resource Center of Buffalo: Ten Frequently Asked Questions
   http://www.holocaustcenterbuff.com/questions.html

3. History of the Holocaust
   http://www.ushmm.org/topics/

4. The Camps: Auschwitz & How it Functioned
   http://www.spectacle.org/695/ausch.html

5. Photo Tour of Auschwitz
   http://remember.org/educate/intro.html

6. Questions You Might Have About the Holocaust: 66 Q & A's
   http://www.nizkor.org/features/qar/qar00.html

7. George Welling's Post-Holocaust Story
   http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?op=viewarticle&artid=288

8. Question a Holocaust Survivor
   http://www.wiesenthal.com/library/surviv_01.cfm

9. Holocaust Studies
   http://search.aish.com/holocaust/default.asp?s=g&k=holocaust

EVALUATION:

Your report will be evaluated, using the following criteria:

1. Open-ended journal responses: (30 points)
   - quality of thinking revealed in the journals
   - quality of details
   - coverage of multiple web sites
   - listing of all sites visited
2. Documentary Report: (70 points)
   - Focus: A limited idea has been chosen which is significant.
   - Development: The central idea is demonstrated with concrete details and examples.
   - Accuracy: Bibliographic citations are provided for ideas drawn from sites.
   - Presentation: Writing is clear and carefully edited. Report includes pictures/graphics which add interest to the presentation.

Appendix C

Humanities Research Project

In this assignment you will write a brief (5-8 page) research paper on a topic of your choice by choosing three paintings by one artist from the periods of the 17th through the 20th century. Research scholarly sources and prepare a research report that includes your analysis of the paintings and connects the artist's choice of subject matter and/or technique to concepts which we have studied in this course. Formulate your own central idea from studying the paintings and reading research about the artist and aesthetic of the period.

Choose at least four scholarly sources to research your topic (you may use one web resource which is scholarly, i.e. it is clear that the source is carefully researched). Your paper should have a clear thesis and the paper should describe and explain the particular works of art and explicitly show how they connect with ideas which we have studied in this course or demonstrate your central idea. For example, you might show how three landscape paintings by Constable reflect the spirit of romanticism.

Paper length: 5-8 pages, typed, using the regular formatting for a research essay.

Rubric

Formulate your own specific Topic by choosing **three paintings by one artist** from the periods of the 17th through the 20th century. Analyze the paintings and connect the artist's choice of subject matter and/or technique to concepts which we have studied in this course.

1. Clear thesis--10 pts.
2. Clear and well-detailed description and explanation of three particular works of art--40 pts.
3. Analysis explicitly shows how the paintings connect with ideas studied in this course--30pts.
4. Paper uses at least four scholarly sources on the topic (only one web resources which is clearly scholarly)--10 pts.
5. Paper length: 5-8 pages, typed, using the regular formatting for a research essay. Appearance and correctness--10 pts.

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